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PRESIDENT WITHERSPOON IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

ALTHOUGH John Witherspoon did not come to America until the year 1768,—long after he had himself passed the middle line of human life,—yet so quickly did he then enter into the spirit of American society, so perfectly did he identify himself with its nobler moods of discontent and aspiration, so powerfully did he contribute by speech and act to the right development of this new nation out of the old cluster of dispersed and dependent communities, that it would be altogether futile to attempt to frame a just account of the great intellectual movements of our Revolution without taking some note of the part played in it by this eloquent, wise, and efficient Scotsman—at once teacher, preacher, politician, law-maker, and philosopher, upon the whole not undeserving of the praise which has been bestowed upon him as “one of the great men of the age and of the world.”¹

Born in 1722, in the parish of Yester, fourteen miles east of Edinburgh,—a parish of which his father was minister,—he was able upon his mother’s side to trace his lineage, through an unbroken line of Presbyterian ministers, back to John Knox. That such a man should ever, in any country, come to lend his support to a system of rather bold conduct respecting royal personages in general, was hardly a thing to shock or surprise any single drop of blood in his body. At the age of twenty, he was graduated from the University of Edinburgh, where he had for associates Hugh Blair, James Robertson, and John Erskine. At the age of twenty-two, he became minister of the parish of Beith in the west of Scotland. At the age of thirty-four, he became pastor of the Low Church in Paisley. At the age of forty-six, after having declined calls to Presbyterian congregations in Dundee, Dublin, and Rotterdam, he accepted an invitation to the presidency of the College of New Jersey—an invitation which he had already declined two years before. At the time of his removal to America, therefore, he had achieved distinction as a preacher and an ecclesiastical leader. Even as an author, also,

¹ Sprague, *Annals*, etc., III. 289.

he had become well known, his chief publications, at that time, being *An Essay on Justification*; *A Practical Treatise on Regeneration*; *A Serious Enquiry into the Nature and Effects of the Stage*; a prose satire, called *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*; besides several volumes of sermons, and a collection of miscellaneous writings in three volumes, entitled *Essays on Important Subjects*.¹

His advent to the college over which he was to preside was like that of a prince coming to his throne. From the moment of his landing in Philadelphia until that of his arrival in Princeton, his movements were attended by every circumstance that could manifest affection and homage; and on the evening of the day on which he made his entry into what was thenceforward to be his home, "the college edifice was brilliantly illuminated; and not only the whole village, but the adjacent country, and even the province at large, shared in the joy of the occasion."² It is pleasant to know that in the six-and-twenty years of public service that then lay before him in America, the person of whom so much was expected, not only did not disappoint, but by far exceeded, the high hopes that had thus been set upon him. For once in this world, as it turned out, a man of extraordinary force, versatility, and charm had found the place exactly suited to give full swing and scope to every element of power within him.

He seems to have come at the right moment, to the right spot, in the right way. Being perhaps equally apt for thought and for action, and having quite remarkable gifts as preacher, debater, conversationist, politician, and man of affairs, happily he found himself, in the fulness of his ripened powers, in a station of great dignity and prominence, near the centre of the new national life of America, in the midst of a kindred people just rousing themselves with fierce young energy to the tasks and risks of a stupendous crisis in their history. Thenceforth, whatsoever John Witherspoon had it in him to do, in things sacred or secular, in life academic or practical, in the pulpit, in the provincial convention, in the Continental Congress, for the shaping, in war and

¹ The most of these publications, together with his later writings, are to be found in his collected *Works*, of which two editions have appeared: the one in four volumes, Philadelphia, 1800-1801; the other in nine volumes, Edinburgh, 1804-1805. The latter is the edition used by me. For biographical sketches of Witherspoon, the reader is referred to these editions of his *Works*: also, to the sermon preached at his funeral by John Rodgers, with a valuable appendix by Samuel Stanhope Smith; to J. Sanderson, *The Signers of the Declaration of Independence*, V. 99-186; to Sprague, *Annals*, etc., III. 288-300. The article on Witherspoon, in *Appleton's Cyclopædia of American Biography*, VI. 584, 585, is worth attention.

² Sprague, *Annals*, etc., III. 292.

peace, of the thought and character and destiny of this primitive, passionate, indomitable people, he then had the opportunity to do. That opportunity, so precious and so rare in the experience of men, he did not fail to use to the utmost.

Even in the exterior personal gifts which make for influence, he was not lacking. It was said of him that, with the exception of Washington, he had more of the quality called presence than, perhaps, any other man of his time in America. He was, moreover, kindly and companionable in private intercourse, and fascinated men by talk sparkling with anecdote, epigram, and repartee.

In the due order of things, his earliest appearance before the public was in the pulpit, which, to the very end of his career, continued to be the true seat and organ of his best activity and influence. Having the gift of easily remembering whatever he wrote, and of speaking naturally what he thus remembered, he was able to give to his sermons the double attraction of premeditated and of extemporaneous speech; and both for the matter and the manner of discourse, he soon took rank here as one of the foremost preachers of his time. As a contemporary of his has testified: "President Witherspoon's popularity as a preacher was great. The knowledge that he was to conduct a public service, usually filled the largest churches in our cities and populous towns, and he never failed to command the profound attention of his audience."¹ Notwithstanding the prodigious variety of those public and private engagements which were soon laid upon him, he maintained to the very end the supremacy of his sacred calling, and never, either by dress, or speech, or conduct, permitted his career as a civilian even to seem to involve any lapse or suspension of his character as a clergyman.

As the call that had brought him to America was the call to preside over the College of New Jersey, its interests very properly had the first claim upon his attention; and, before he had been long in charge of them, it became evident that, through him, the college was about to enter upon a new and a larger life. He addressed himself, first of all, to that need which is the primary, classic, and perennial need of every college fit to exist at all,—the need of money; and the extraordinary success he had therein was due partly to his own extraordinary energy and tact, and partly to the sheer confidence of the public in anything for which he chose to concern himself. He also brought about an enlargement of the curriculum by the introduction of new courses, particularly in Hebrew and in French; and through his own brilliant example

¹ Ashbel Green, in Sprague, *Annals*, etc., III. 299.

as a lecturer on eloquence, history, philosophy, and divinity, he encouraged methods of instruction far more manly, vital, and stimulating than those previously in vogue there. Finally, his fame as a divine, and soon, also, as a statesman and a patriot, continually added to the reputation of the college, and attracted to it during his time some of the brightest and noblest of American youths. Perhaps John Witherspoon was the first man among us to illustrate in a high degree the possibilities for influence to be found in this very modern and peculiar function of an American college president.

Before many years, also, as the struggle with the British ministry took on more and more its tragic aspect, Witherspoon's labors as preacher and as college officer began to be overlaid by his labors as a political writer and a statesman. It has been well said of him that "he became an American the moment he landed on our shores";¹ and, having quickly mastered the questions in dispute, he showed from the outset a rational, temperate, but unflinching sympathy with the rising spirit of American opposition. By the spring of the year 1776, it was no longer possible for him to hold back from more direct employment in the Revolution; and he then began his political career by taking his place as a member of the convention for framing the first constitution for New Jersey.² His service in that body gave a new *éclat* to his reputation, and great access to the public confidence in him; and, on the 21st of June, 1776, he received promotion by being transferred from the convention of New Jersey to the Continental Congress, in which body he took his seat in time to give his voice and his vote in favor of the Declaration of Independence.

Thus, at last, was John Witherspoon brought as an active force into the highest sphere of American statesmanship, and at a period of supreme opportunity in our affairs. In that sphere he remained and wrought, with but a single brief interval, until the virtual close of the Revolution. From the beginning, he took and held the foremost rank among his associates. In the mere erudition required for statesmanship, especially at such a crisis, probably few of them were so well equipped as he. This, perhaps, was to have been expected, in view of his previous personal history. They, however, who had supposed that this great academic personage—this renowned divine and philosopher—would in Congress prove himself to be a mere amateur in statesmanship, a doctrinaire and

¹ Sanderson, *The Signers, etc.*, V. 115.

² Poore, *The Federal and State Constitutions*, II. 1310-1314.

a dreamer, were permitted to enjoy a great surprise. His long training in ecclesiastical politics in Scotland had left to him few things to learn as regards the handling of secular politics in America: he was familiar with the usages of legislative bodies, he had consummate skill in debate, he knew how to influence men to think and act with himself. Throughout all those years in which there were in Congress advocates for an imbecile military policy, for financial shuffling and dishonor, even for the annihilation of all genuine national life, the wit, the wisdom, the moral force of this shrewd Scotsman were to be found on the side of wholesome measures,—an assured union of the insurgent states; more power at the centre of government; terms of enlistment long enough to make an army worth having after it had become an army; the management of the public finances on the only principles that have ever proved sound or profitable in the conduct of any business public or private.¹ Moreover, it became soon apparent that, in his view, the chief duty of a congressman was not to talk, but to work. At the sessions of Congress, no member was more constant in attendance; in committees, no one wrought harder, or had harder tasks entrusted to him.²

The powerful influence which, through his published writings, Witherspoon exerted upon the course of Revolutionary thought, may be traced in the very few sermons of his which touch upon the political problems of that time, in various congressional papers, and especially in the numerous essays, long or short, serious or mirthful, which he gave to the press between the years 1775 and 1783, and commonly without his name.

His most memorable sermon during this period was that preached by him at Princeton on the 17th of May, 1776, being the general fast appointed by Congress throughout the United Colonies,—an opportunity for solemn delay and for reflection before that great step should be taken which could not be taken back. Witherspoon's discourse bore an imposing title, “The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men,”³ and contained a calm and very striking statement of his reasons for concurring in the American demand for the control by Americans of their own

¹ For example, see his speeches in Congress “On the Confederation,” *Works*, IX. 135–141; “On a Motion for Paying the Interest of Loan-Office Certificates,” *ibid.*, 117–124; “On the Finances,” *ibid.*, 125–134; also his remarkable “Essay on Money,” *ibid.*, 9–25.

² A fairly good idea of the nature and value of Witherspoon’s services as a member of the Congress from 1776 to 1782, may be gathered from Sanderson, *The Signers*, etc., V. 116–157.

³ *Works*, V. 176–216.

affairs. It was much read on both sides of the Atlantic; and at Glasgow it was sent forth embellished with notes of dissent and indignation wherein the reverend author was called a rebel and a traitor.¹ To the American edition of the sermon, Witherspoon added an "Address to the Natives of Scotland residing in America,"²—an effective and a much-needed treatment of that series of events, in both countries, which had resulted in so extensive an alienation of American Scotsmen from the cause of American self-government.

As a writer of political and miscellaneous essays, commonly published in the newspapers, it is probable that Witherspoon's activity was far greater than can now be ascertained; but his hand can be traced with certainty in a large group of keen and sprightly productions of that sort,—"Reflections on the Present State of Public Affairs and on the Duty and Interest of America in this Important Crisis,"³ "Thoughts on American Liberty,"⁴ "On the Controversy about Independence,"⁵ "On Conducting the American Controversy,"⁶ "Aristides,"⁷ "On the Contest between Great Britain and America,"⁸ "On the Affairs of the United States,"⁹ "Observations on the Improvement of America,"¹⁰ and a series of periodical papers called "The Druid."¹¹ His gift for personal and political satire is shown in "The Humble and Earnest Supplication of J. Rivington, Printer and Bookseller in New York,"¹² and "Recantation of Benjamin Towne."¹³ By far the most masterly secular writing of Witherspoon's is his "Essay on Money as a Medium of Commerce, with Remarks on the Advantages and Disadvantages of Paper admitted into General Circulation,"¹⁴ principally made up of portions of speeches delivered by him in Congress, and conveying much invaluable and unfamiliar truth to the American people, then, as so often since then, mired in the bog of financial fallacies and impostures.

Of all these writings of Witherspoon, dealing in grave or playful fashion with Revolutionary themes, the chief note is that of a virile mind, well-balanced, well-trained, and holding itself steadily to its own independent conclusions,—in short, of enlightened and imperturbable common-sense, speaking out in a form always

¹ Sprague, *Annals*, etc., III. 293, 294.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 88–98.

² *Works*, V. 217–236.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 166–170.

³ *Ibid.*, IX. 66–72.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 171–177.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 73–77.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 178, 179.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 78–82.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 224–291.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 83–87.

¹² *Ibid.*, 180–191.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 192–198; also, Albert H. Smyth, *The Philadelphia Magazines*, etc., 56, 57.

¹⁴ *Works*, IX. 9–65.

temperate and lucid, often terse and epigrammatic. "There is not a single instance in history," says he, "in which civil liberty was lost, and religious liberty preserved entire. If, therefore, we yield up our temporal property, we at the same time deliver the conscience into bondage."¹ As to the ministers, Parliament, and people of Great Britain, "I do not refuse submission to their unjust claims because they are corrupt or profligate, although probably many of them are so, but because they are men, and therefore liable to all the selfish bias inseparable from human nature; . . . because they are separated from us, independent of us, and have an interest in opposing us."² "It has been my opinion from the beginning that we did not carry our reasoning fully home when we complained of an arbitrary prince, or of the insolence, cruelty, and obstinacy of Lord North, Lord Bute, or Lord Mansfield. What we have to fear, and what we have to grapple with, is the ignorance, prejudice, partiality, and injustice of human nature."³ "The question then is: Shall we make resistance with the greatest force,—as rebel subjects of a government which we acknowledge, or as independent states against an usurped power which we detest and abhor?"⁴ "Is there a probable prospect of reconciliation on constitutional principles? What are these constitutional principles? Will anybody show that Great Britain can be sufficiently sure of our dependence, and yet we sure of our liberties?"⁵ "It is proper to observe that the British settlements have been improved in a proportion far beyond the settlements of other European nations. To what can this be ascribed? Not to the climate, for they are of all climates; not to the people, for they are a mixture of all nations. It must, therefore, be resolved singly into the degree of British liberty which they brought from home, and which pervaded more or less their several constitutions."⁶ "Can any person of a liberal mind wish that these great and growing countries should be brought back to a state of subjection to a distant power? And can any man deny that, if they had yielded to the claims of the British Parliament, they would have been no better than a parcel of tributary states, ruled by lordly tyrants, and exhausted by unfeeling pensioners, under the commission of one too distant to hear the cry of oppression, and surrounded by those who had an interest in deceiving him?"⁷ "It ought, therefore, in my opinion, to meet with the cordial approbation of every impartial person,

¹ *Works*, V. 203.

² *Ibid.*, IX. 80.

⁶ *Ibid.*, V. 223.

² *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

as I am confident it will of posterity, that they have united for common defence, and resolved that they will be both free and independent, because they cannot be the one without the other.”¹ As to American independence, “I mean to shew—1. That it was necessary. 2. That it will be honorable and profitable. And, 3. That in all probability it will be no injury, but a real advantage, to the island of Great Britain.”²

Of this newly born and newly announced nation, thus starting out in life with a very serious war on its infant hands, the direst need was, not of men to do the fighting, but of money to sustain the men while they were fighting; and in the way of all this stood, not only the organic impotence of the general government, but the ignorant, false, and reckless notions as to money and as to the relation of government to money, which these people had brought over with them from their colonial stage, and which, in fact, they had long been putting into practice to their own incalculable loss and shame. Under such circumstances, what greater service to the American cause could have been rendered by a man like Witherspoon, than by exposing, as he did, the financial sophistries of Revolutionary demagogues and blatherskites, and by putting into pithy, lucid, and fearless words the essential and immutable truths as to what is possible and desirable in public finance? “No paper of any kind is, properly speaking, money. It ought never to be made a legal tender. It ought not to be forced upon anybody, because it cannot be forced upon everybody.”³ “The cry of the scarcity of money is generally putting the effect for the cause. No business can be done, say some, because money is scarce. It may be said, with more truth, money is scarce because little business is done. Yet their influence, like that of many other causes and effects, is reciprocal.”⁴ “Too much money may be emitted upon loan; but to emit money in any other way than upon loan, is to do all evil and no good.”⁵ “The excessive quantity of paper emitted by the different states of America, will probably be a loss to the whole. They cannot, however, take advantage of one another in that way. That state which emits most will lose most, and *vice versa.*”⁶ “Those who refuse doubtful paper, and thereby disgrace it, or prevent its circulation, are not enemies, but friends, to their country.”⁷

Happy was it for us, that this clear-headed thinker, this expert in the art of popular exposition, was in full sympathy with those deep human currents of patriotic thought and feeling which then

¹ *Works*, V. 224.

³ *Ibid.*, IX. 63.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁷ *Ibid.*

² *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

swept towards an independent national life in this land. Happy was it for us, also, that while he was capable beyond most men of seeing the historic and cosmopolitan significance of the movement for American independence, he had the moral greatness to risk even his own great favor with the American people, by telling them that the acquisition of independence was not to be the end of their troubles, but rather, in some sense, the beginning of them; since greater perils than those brought in by Red Coats and Hessians were then to meet them, in the form of shallow and anarchical politics, corruption among voters, unscrupulous partisanship, new and hitherto unimagined forms of demagogism, and the boisterous incompetence of men entrusted with power in the regulation and guidance of the state. He who declared that the American Revolution would be "an important era in the history of mankind,"¹ also said: "I am much mistaken if the time is not just at hand when there shall be greater need than ever in America for the most accurate discussion of the principles of society, the rights of nations, and the policy of states;" and that only by making a people "virtuous," can they be made "invincible."²

MOSES COIT TYLER.

¹ *Works*, V. 222.

² *Ibid.*, IX. 231.